

Establishing Screen Time Guidelines for Children and Teens

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Smartphones, tablets, and video streaming are just a few of the new technologies in this digital age that kids are growing up around that their parents never had. Today, it is not uncommon to see a young child using different applications to watch their favorite show or engage in learning activities and it's easier than ever before for children and adolescents to get swept away in a favorite game or binge watch a TV series.

But it's a parent's responsibility to set limits for their children online and offline to establish and teach safe behaviors in the real and online worlds. "It's essential for parents to be good role models. Kids look up to their parents for what to do so it's really important that they model what they want to see. Work together and look at privacy platforms and discuss as a family the media free times and zones and why you need those. It's all about finding a balance, safe boundaries, and really good communication," says Dr. Scott Goldstein, a pediatrician at Northwestern Children's Practice.

The American Academy of Pediatrics' (AAP) prior recommendations regarding screen time were back in 1999, but more recently they were adapted in 2016 after the social media boom in 2007. In the past, there was no need for such specific recommendations. The guidelines are

now more specific by age group as one size does not fit all. Here are the guidelines recommended by the AAP:

- For children younger than 18 months, use of screen media other than video chatting should be discouraged
- Parents of children 18-24 months of age who want to introduce digital media should choose high quality programming/ apps and use them together with children
- Children older than 2 years, media limits are very appropriate. Limit screen time to no more than one hour or less per day of high quality programming

These guidelines can be helpful if your family needs structure. “We guide parents toward healthy media so it doesn’t interfere with a healthy lifestyle, including activities like sleep, being physically active, face to face time, and healthy eating patterns,” says Dr. Rebecca Unger, a pediatrician at Northwestern Children’s Practice.

Discussing Digital Citizenship

It is also important to remember that there can be positive and negative effects to media. It is very important to discuss “digital citizenship” with your child. “The goal of parents, healthcare providers, schools and businesses are to help children be a good digital citizen by giving them a safe space to develop and foster independence and engage in different experiences. Make sure they learn about online etiquette, social and personal impact, and what their digital footprint is,” Dr. Unger says.

Dr. Unger and Dr. Goldstein have recommended these healthy media tips that are endorsed by the AAP:

1. Designate media free locations such as the bedroom
2. Make sure there are media free times such as meal times and driving
3. Discuss safe media usage
4. Model appropriate use
5. Make sure there is a balance

Healthychildren.org is the website backed by the AAP where you can find the media use plan. Dr. Unger and Dr. Goldstein also recommend a website called commonsensemedia.org that provides information on what parents can do besides the family media plan.

Dr. Rebecca Unger and Dr. Scott Goldstein are pediatricians at Northwestern Children’s Practice and are giving a lecture Wednesday, January 24th on a Family Guide to Media Use as part of the Free Welcome to Parenting Discussion Series. Details and registration for the lecture can be found on their website www.nwcppediatrics.com.